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1801

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ON

THE POWER AND VALUE

OF

NATIONAL LIBERTY.

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THE POWER AND VALUE

OF

NATIONAL LIBERTY.

DELIVERED

TO A LARGE ASSEMBLY OF CITIZENS, AT MILESTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA, ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4. 1801.

BY ALEXANDER WILSON, 1766-1813.

Disguise thyself as thou wilt, still, Slavery, still thou art a bitter draught, and though thousands, in all ages, have been made to drink of thee, thou art no less bitter on that account. STERNE.

PHILADELPHIA:

PRINTED BY H. MAXWELL, COLUMBIA-HOUSE.

1801.

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GENTLEMEN,

THE subject to which I mean to call your attention; on this distinguished occasion, is THE POWER AND VALUE OF NATIONAL LIBERTY; a subject of all other earthly concerns the most interesting to men; but particularly so to free-men. It is indeed with the deepest consciousness of my utter inability to do justice to so noble a theme, that I venture to address you on this auspicious day; but trusting, with all my deficiencies, to the indulgence of this numerous and respectable assembly, many of whom I know have hazarded their lives in defence of liberty, and all of whom I trust glory in this inestimable inheritance, I solicit for myself your kind and patient attention.

There is not, perhaps, in the whole English language, a more expressive term than the word LIBERTY. The very sound seems to inspire with ardour, and to rouse the heart to energy. Among the ancient Romans it was a sacred and soul-inspiring name, that animated their legions to battle, and resounded in times of peace through that immense republic, in songs of triumph. During your late arduous, but triumphant struggle for INDEPENDENCE, in this western world, with a powerful and inveterate antagonist; a kingdom of soldiers and seamen, provided with every necessary, and every implement of destruction in abundance, against an infant colony of farmers and woodsmen, without fleets, without armies, unpractised in the bloody arts of war, and dispersed over an immense country, it was this inspiring name, LIBERTY, that collected from every direction your gallant youths....that created arms, heroes, and armies....that bore you on, through every danger and every difficulty, to victory and glory; and drove your enemies before you back to the ocean, as the gloomy clouds of the east roll back before the irresistible fury of the roaring north-west.—It was this illustrious name, and your glorious example, that roused, as if by electricity, a great, but deeply oppressed nation, of twenty-five millions of people, to burst the chains and rivetted shackles of despotism,

as in a moment, and to hurl back the accumulated vengeance of ages of sufferings on the heads of their overwhelmed oppressors. It was this that demolished the gloomy dungeons of the bastile....that dethroned, and devoted to punishment, a once powerful monarch, and has rendered the French nation not only invincible, but victorious over the whole combined arms of Europe.

How astonishing that *one word* should produce such extraordinary effects; and more astonishing still, if, as some persons assert, this thing liberty be nothing more than a name.... an ideal notion, that exists but in imagination. Amazing indeed! that a mere name....an ideal notion should inspire millions of men to scorn every danger, to face death in its most terrible forms, and glory, with their expiring breath, in their cause. No, gentlemen! the heroes of America, thank heaven! have demonstrated to the world, that liberty is something more than a name....something more than a notion....That it is a blessed and substantial reality, the great strength and happiness of nations, and the universal and best friend of man. In order to give you a concise and comprehensive definition of true liberty, it will be necessary for me, in the first place, to observe, that there have been people in the world, weak or wicked enough to believe, that liberty was the right and privi-

lege of doing just whatever they pleased. This so far from being liberty, is the most complete tyranny; and would, if adopted, introduce universal anarchy, and the total subversion of all society. The strong would overpower the weak; they, in their turn, would prey upon and devour one another; all right, justice and civilization would be completely swept away, and nothing left of man but an unprincipled herd of ferocious savages. This, therefore, cannot be true liberty, even according to these gentlemen's own opinions; for it would then be no imaginary notion, no airy dream, but a most dreadful reality indeed.

There have been others, who have imagined liberty to consist in an *equality of property*, and have looked upon those who were richer, or had greater possessions than themselves, as exceptions to, and violators of this their favourite system of liberty. Such an opinion as this can only arise from ignorance or want of reflection on the nature of man. A moment's consideration might, methinks, make its absurdity and even impossibility evident to every one. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that such an equal and universal distribution of property was made, how long would it continue so? Not a day! no, perhaps, not an hour! Some would be more indolent, some more extravagant, others more industrious, careful or enterprizing, than the rest and

the property of these would increase or diminish accordingly. If, indeed, all men were equally strong, equally industrious, frugal, and ingenious such a state of things might, perhaps, be possible; but as mankind now are, of such various inclinations, powers and dispositions, disproportion of property is only a necessary consequence of this disproportion of abilities, and has been, and will continue to be so till the end of time. No, gentlemen! true liberty consists, not in depriving any person of the advantages of superior talents and acquirements, or in robbing the industrious to support the idle and extravagant; but in securing to every man the fruits of his own honest diligence, or those which have descended to him from his forefathers. True genuine national liberty, may, in a few words, be defined thus.. .the full and unrestrained freedom of speaking and acting to promote our own happiness, in so far as we do not encroach on the like rights of another.... The secure protection of person and property under good and equitable laws....The strict and impartial distribution of justice to all ranks and descriptions of persons....and the free exercise of opinion and Religious Worship. These constitute true liberty....these are the fountains from whence every blessing flows that renders human life desirable. Nor are they the gifts of man, but the birth-right of every human

the human race have been murdered, with every circumstance of cruelty, to satiate the ambition, revenge, or madness of tyranny! Even at this moment, how many of our fellow creatures, in different quarters of the world, as virtuous, as brave, as deserving as we are, lie groaning in hopeless wretchedness, under the trampling feet of this monster, denied even the poor comfort of complaining. Yes, Citizens! millions of your fellow beings are at this moment in actual want of bread....surrounded by all the horrors of famine, not the effect of unproductive seasons, or bad crops, but the consequence of a long, bloody, and unjust war, begun and persisted in contrary to the will and in spite of the wishes, tears and prayers of the people.

Need I enlarge further on this gloomy side of the subject, to raise in your souls an abhorrence of tyranny? Need I add to this black catalogue, the bloody persecutions, burnings, banishments, and imprisonments for religion, that have disgraced every country in Europe? Where men were compelled to act contrary to their consciences, or suffer death. Where the flames were kindled, the images of saints presented, and the poor sufferer left to his choice, to worship the one, or be thrown into the other. Where gloomy inquisitions were erected, and wheels racks, and other instruments of torture, set to work in their dismal dungeons, the bare recital

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human race, THAT TYRANNY SHALL BE NO LONGER.

To promote this great event, which, according to the whole tenor of sacred prophecy, and, indeed, from present appearances, seems fast approaching, you, gentlemen, and your fellow-citizens, as freemen and as Americans, are to be no unconcerned spectators. Hitherto you have acted a most distinguished part in this grand effort of mankind to rescue themselves from tyranny. First in the glorious career of nations, you have shown what liberty *can* do. Your example and your unparalleled prosperity has aroused and animated distant nations. On you, and on this your great fabric of liberty, are the eyes of every people on earth directed. On *your* success in this grand experiment of representative government....On your established greatness and rising glory, the destinies of mankind....the liberties of the world are suspended. You have *acquired*, it is now your great business to *preserve* and perpetuate to posterity this invaluable treasure.

What would you think of that farmer who should bestow the greatest labour in cultivating his fields, and yet pay no regard to his fences....take no pains to prevent the inroads and destruction made among his harvests? What would you think of the inhabi-

tants of that city, who, though in continual danger of being attacked by a cruel enemy, should yet let their gates stand open, and their walls go to ruin? Liberty is this strong FENCE, that protects and secures to you the fruits of your labour. Liberty is that WALL, those GATES and RAMPARTS, that surround and defend you from the merciless fury of Tyranny, who forever raves around them, bellowing for entrance, and thirsting for blood. It is, therefore, your deepest interest, as well as duty, to be vigilant and watchful of the motions and designs of this prowling enemy of your peace, your prosperity, religion and happiness. Acquaint yourselves minutely with the true principles of liberty, on which the different state governments and your great federal compact is founded. Read books of authentic history, and travels. They will inform you of the fatal consequences of the loss of liberty, to the different nations of the world. Contrast the wants and wretchedness experienced by your fellow-creatures in other countries, with the peace, plenty and felicity you enjoy in this. Remember, that for all these, under Providence, you are indebted to liberty.....Infuse these ideas into your children. Cultivate their minds, and enlarge their understandings by education and reading. Set before them in your own persons, examples of firm patriotism and gen-

ũne piety. Inure them to habits of industry, œconomy and virtue, love of country, and gratitude to the Great Giver of all good. Then may the storms of aristocracy roar, and the fury of foreign or domestic enemies swell and rage around you. Your liberty, founded on this immoveable rock, its structure adorned, and its energy directed by that incorruptible Republican, who, on this ever memorable day, has ascended into the chair of state, shall roll back all their meditated mischief on their own heads, and your country rise in strength, grandeur and prosperity....the seat of learning and of arts....the abode of plenty and of peace.... the asylum of the persecuted, and the pride and glory of the world. Is this hope great and elevating? Who then, that so lately beheld the surrounding glooms of aristocracy, descending in dismal darkness, and threatening to blast and bury forever from our view this glorious prospect....what republican, I say, who eyed with a throbbing and indignant heart, the evil genius of despotism breaking into this our western paradise, to plunge us into a world of woe, who feels not now a flood of joy, swell his overflowing heart on this triumphant day, at the defeat and expulsion of this arch fiend, and the universal overthrow of his fallen associates. The majesty of the people arose, and their ene-

mies were hurled to the regions of despair and ignominy. The clouds are now dispersing.... The prospect brightens with more splendour than ever, and every patriotic heart welcomes this happy era.

O'er vast Columbia's varied clime,
Her cities, forests, shores and dales,
In rising majesty sublime,
Immortal Liberty prevails.

Hail long expected glorious day!
Illustrious, memorable morn,
That freedom's Fabric from decay
Rebuilds....for Millions yet unborn.

His country's glory, hope and stay,
In virtue and in talents try'd
Now rises to assume the sway....
O'er this great Temple to preside.

Within its hallow'd walls immense,
No hireling bands shall e'er arise,
Array'd in tyranny's defence,
To crush an injur'd people's cries.

No lordling here, with gorging jaws,
Shall wring from industry the food,
No holy bigot's fiery laws,
Lay waste our ruin'd fields in blood.

Here strangers from a thousand shores,
Compell'd by tyranny to roam,
Shall find amidst abundant stores,
A nobler and a happier home.

Here Art shall lift her laurel'd head,
Wealth, Industry, and Peace divine,
And where unbounded forests spread,
Shall fields and lofty cities shine.

From Europe's wants and woes remote
A friendly waste of waves between,
Here plenty cheers the humblest cot,
And smiles on every village green.

Here, free as air's expanded space,
To every soul and sect shall be,
That sacred privilege of our race,
The worship of the Deity.

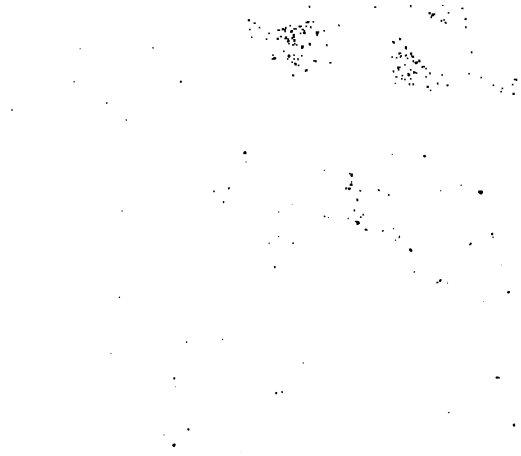
These gifts, great Liberty! are thine,
Ten thousand more we owe to thee;
Immortal may their memories shine,
Who fought and died for liberty.

What heart but hails a scene so bright?
What soul but inspiration draws?
Who would not guard so dear a right;
Or die in such a glorious cause?

Let foes to freedom dread the name;
But should they touch this sacred tree,
Thrice fifty thousand swords shall flame
For Jefferson and Liberty!

From Georgia to lake Champlain,
From seas to Mississippi's shore,
Ye sons of freedom loud proclaim,
THE REIGN OF TERROR IS NO MORE!

Rejoice Columbia's sons! rejoice!
To tyrants never bend the knee;
But join with heart and soul and voice
For VIRTUE, PEACE and LIBERTY!



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